

---

The Opinion Pages

# *Charlie Company and the Small-Unit War*

---

ANDREW WIEST VIETNAM '67 MAY 16, 2017

Operation Cedar Falls. Operation Junction City. Operation Scotland. With nearly 500,000 American troops in country by the close of the year, 1967 is often remembered as the period when Gen. William Westmoreland took the war to the enemy in major operations across the length and breadth of South Vietnam. From War Zone C to Dak To to Con Thien, the result was heavy fighting in major battles that dominated the headlines back home. That year American forces had 9,377 dead and 12,716 wounded, almost double the numbers of the previous year.

But the reality of the Vietnam War for most American soldiers was quite different. For them, Vietnam was a war of humping the boonies on a constant search for an enemy that didn't want to be found, sloshing through rice paddies, hacking through jungles or rummaging through hooches. More often than not, patrols proved only a "long walk in the hot sun," leading to the detention of a few Vietcong suspects, but no contact. Perhaps men would set off booby traps, with a leg lost here, a foot maimed there. Or maybe there would be some incoming sniper fire.

Battles, though, were a comparative rarity, and when they did happen they tended to be small affairs, not the stuff of news reports. It all made up the daily grind of the Vietnam War infantryman. For most soldiers, Vietnam was a vicious, small-

unit war that is best understood at the human level — the level that books and movies all too often fail adequately to portray. It was a war of individual intimacy in which the luck of the draft draw resulted in young lives lost, futures shattered and dreams vanished.

That's the story of Don Peterson. Born in Salinas, Calif., in 1947, Don was the epitome of the male baby boomer. His father, Pete, worked in construction and drank a bit too much, but the family was solidly middle class. Popular in high school and a star center for the football team, Don dreamed of growing up to become a painter like his dad and starting a family of his own.

During his junior year Don was asked to the Sadie Hawkins dance by Jacque McMullen, a girl he hardly knew. Jacque was a blond beauty and very popular, and Don accepted the invitation with enthusiasm. Soon they were dating and enjoying walks along the beach, surfing, cruising while listening to the Beatles, drinking beer they were not yet old enough to buy. After graduation, when Don was 19 and Jacque was 17, they married in his grandparents' house. They found a tiny apartment, and in the spring of 1966 Jacque came home from the doctor's office with the surprise news that she was pregnant, only to find Don standing at the mailbox looking in disbelief at his draft notice.

Jacque followed Don to Fort Riley, Kan., where they shared a small house with two other couples from the newly reactivated Ninth Infantry Division. Even though the house was so small that a large closet had to be converted into living quarters, it was all great fun. Jacque got to experiment at being a homemaker and learned cooking tips from her new housemates while basic training got Don into the best shape of his life.

Vietnam, though, became all too real when Don took Jacque to Montgomery, Ala., to live with her mother and stepfather as he prepared to ship out. Their child, James, was born during the last days of Don's Christmas leave. Weighing in at 9 pounds, Jimmy was a big kid, and Don immediately began to dream aloud about his child's future gridiron prowess. He was able to hold little Jimmy for just an hour before he had to catch the train to return to Fort Riley. As Don turned to leave,

Jacque tearfully said: “Don’t run out and be any kind of hero. Keep your head down. We need you!”

On May 15, 1967, Don’s unit — Charlie Company, Fourth Battalion of the 47th Infantry Regiment — was running just another operation on just another day, hunting for the Vietcong. Maybe Don had a premonition. Usually his letters home to Jacque were nothing but positive, asking questions about little Jimmy and filling her in on the doings of his circle of friends. But on May 10, Don had written something different, something ominous. I’m going to die, he wrote. Please get me out of here.

It was the turn of Don’s group, the Second Squad of First Platoon, to walk point on May 15 as Charlie Company made ready to cross another open rice paddy in the Mekong Delta. A sniper round buzzed past. Charlie Nelson turned to Don, saying, “I wonder if this could be a trap?” There was nothing for it, though. The Second Squad had to go out there and reconnoiter the line of Charlie Company’s advance. As the squad reached the center of the paddy, and the men were furthest from cover, all hell broke loose.

Concentrated small-arms fire burst out from a Vietcong unit of company size dug into bunkers that formed an L-shaped ambush position. Badly outmanned, Second Squad hit the dirt, but almost immediately the casualties started. Charlie Nelson was shot through the chin and had his kneecap blown off. Dave Jarczewski rushed to his side to dress his wounds, only to be shot himself, with the bullet entering his shoulder, cutting through his midsection, puncturing a lung and breaking five ribs before exiting through his back. Carl Cortright was shot through the spine and paralyzed.

The rest of the squad returned fire as best they could, but they were trapped. And Don knew it. Maybe Jacque’s parting words rang in his ears; maybe it was sheer instinct. But Don acted to save his friends. Shouting, “You guys run like hell, and I’ll cover you,” Don waited an instant before springing to his feet and opening up on the enemy bunkers with his M-16 on full automatic. The men of the Second Squad who could still move started their dash to safety, but only a few seconds later bullets hit Don’s midsection. He yelled, “My chest! My chest!” and toppled back into the rice.

For the rest of the day, the Vietcong and the remainder of Charlie Company fought over, around and through the battered remnants of the Second Squad. Charlie Company had a total of 14 wounded and one dead that day, while dead Vietcong littered the landscape, perhaps 100 in all — the fearsome cost of standing against American firepower. By any measure it was a clear victory for the Americans.

The battle was too small to be graced with a name, or to receive any press coverage back home. But as Charlie Company gathered around the body of Don Peterson that night, war had become all too real. Don had been a larger-than-life presence in the unit. He was the smiling face that brought the company together, the soldier constantly clapping guys on the back and showing off his latest picture of little Jimmy. He was the man in Charlie Company who had the most to live for, and now he was gone. Just put on a helicopter and gone. Never to be seen again.

As the chopper lifted off, the wondering began. Some in Charlie Company felt guilt. Could they have saved him? Should they have braved the fire to try and reach their fallen friend? Others felt an uneasy sense of relief. Don had died, but they had survived. As badly as his loss stung, at least they were still alive. But there was precious little time for reflection. The next morning it was time to shoulder gear and move out. With or without Don Peterson, the war would grind on.

May 15, 1967. In the United States, it was just another day. In the history of the Vietnam War, it was just another day. But for one unit in the Mekong Delta it was unforgettable. It was the day that everyone lost a best friend. It was a day that sent many to the hospital, and some to a lifetime of recovery. It was the day that led some to wrestle with the fact that they had become killers. It was an unremarkable day strategically, but a day on the human level that proved transformative, upending forgotten lives in a forlorn, small-unit war.

Andrew Wiest is a professor of history at the University of Southern Mississippi and the author of “The Boys of ’67: Charlie Company’s War in Vietnam.”

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.*

© 2017 The New York Times Company